

## MISCELLANEOUS.

*Ornithological Notes.* By JOHN ALEXANDER SMITH, M.D.\*

1. *Of the WOODCOCK (Scolopax rusticola, Linn.), breeding in Perthshire and Morayshire, &c.*—It is scarcely necessary for me to remind the Society that the Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) is one of our regular winter visitors, arriving in Britain from the north generally in the beginning of October, and leaving again on its northern journey in March and April. And although this is beyond all doubt the general rule, still a good many instances have occurred from time to time of their remaining to breed both in England and Scotland; and these have apparently become more frequent of later years, or perhaps from the increased number of observers they are now more carefully watched than formerly. But although we have notes of the occurrence of their nests at various times in Scotland, still the young birds have been very rarely seen by our Edinburgh naturalists, so that I have thought it of sufficient interest to call your attention to the subject by exhibiting this *couple of young Woodcocks* which were taken in the neighbourhood of Dunkeld in the end of the month of April last. Judging from their appearance they seem to be about a month, or perhaps six weeks old; and they closely resemble the old bird in their mottled plumage: the first primary however has the outer web edged with a very light-coloured brownish stripe, while the others have the triangularly shaped brown spots like the adult; the bill is rather more than  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inch in length, and the whole bird about 9 inches; whereas the bill of the adult is nearly 3 inches in length, and the whole bird about 14 inches. These birds I have been informed were come upon, when the whole family party were busily engaged catering for food; and on their being disturbed, the parent birds, strange to say, attempted to fly off with their young in their claws, dropping some of them however in their flight, when the young birds were caught by two men who witnessed the whole proceedings: three young birds were caught, but the fourth was believed to have been safely carried off; they were kept alive for a short time, but they soon pined away and died. The Woodcock has been observed to breed at various times in this district around Dunkeld; it is however by no means a common occurrence. Mr. Muirhead, Queen Street, tells me, that when in Morayshire last summer, about the 18th or 19th of June, one of the Earl of Moray's gamekeepers, at Darnaway Castle, assured him that some of the Woodcocks occasionally remained and bred in the neighbourhood, and on Mr. M. (who had never heard anything of the kind before) hinting a doubt on the subject, the keeper offered to show him one of their nests, and remarked that what was far more extraordinary was the fact, that occasionally on coming near a Woodcock's nest, he had seen the old bird rise from it carrying one of her young brood in her claws. And accordingly on going with him to a piece of dry grassy ground, co-

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vered with copse wood, where there was a Woodcock's nest with young birds, and carefully approaching the place, they heard the old bird, as they supposed, give a peculiar cry or "squeel," and saw it immediately fly up with a young bird in its claws; and Mr. Muirhead declares he could not have made any mistake, as the bird was not above ten or twelve yards from him, so that he saw it most distinctly; they then went forward to the nest, and found another fledged young bird still remaining squatted in it, which he was prevented handling, by the keeper informing him that if he did so, it would in all probability be removed, and not brought back again to the nest. He was told that there were generally three or four eggs in the nest. I have the pleasure of also exhibiting an *egg of this bird* which was taken from a nest near Durris, Kincardineshire; it is about 1 inch 10 lines in length, and 1 inch 4 lines in breadth; of a yellowish white, blotched and spotted with gray and various shades of yellowish brown; the spots being more frequent towards the larger end. We have in these instances another detailed account of the curious and extraordinary circumstance of birds attempting to rescue their young from anticipated danger, and in the Woodcock these are by no means to be considered as solitary examples; some three instances of a similar kind occurring in this country being quoted in Yarrell's 'British Birds' (vol. ii. p. 591), from that valuable storehouse of facts in zoology, the 'Magazine of Natural History.' Cases of this kind however seem to be so very strange, that we are inclined to give various explanations before we can persuade ourselves of their possibility, and to one of these I may in passing allude: for example, a bird-fancier told me he had seen instances where the presence of an addled or unhatched egg in the nest of some of his breeding birds, had given rise to the appearance at least of the old bird carrying a young one out of its nest. The bird was sitting very closely on her recently hatched young, the addled egg being accidentally broken, its contents spreading over the breast of the mother as well as over one of the young birds; and on her rapidly leaving the nest to feed, the young one, having become adherent to its mother's breast, was carried out with it; the heat of the mother while in the nest helping to dry the albumen, and in this way glue the two together, and in some instances so closely, that he had been obliged to seize the mother for the purpose of removing the young one, while in other instances it dropped off shortly after the bird left the nest: and this he had seen to occur both in pigeons and canaries. I am not aware how far a similar cause may be considered as explaining any of the instances described as occurring among birds in their state of native freedom; although in many cases I should suppose it impossible to be perfectly certain how the young bird was carried by the mother, whether accidentally or by manifest design. And I suspect it will require more extended and carefully minute observation before we shall be quite able to explain them; still in the several instances noticed by Yarrell, as well as in those to which I have alluded, there seems no reason for doubting the fact of the young bird being actually carried off in the claws of the anxious parent bird. From these young Woodcocks being

hatched so early in the season as the middle of March, if not earlier, and the others in the month of June, one would be inclined to suppose that these birds may occasionally rear two broods in the year (?); or it may be explained merely by some accidental circumstances retarding the nidification of some individuals until such a late period.

2. I also take this opportunity of exhibiting to the Society this very peculiar specimen of the COMMON OR CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza miliaria*, Linn.), which at first sight has more the appearance, in colour at least, of an overgrown mealy canary. Its whole upper and under parts being of a pale yellow, with the exception of a very few brownish spots or feathers scattered over it; these spots consist apparently of the darker colour along the quill of the feather, still remaining in a few instances; the wing-coverts are pure white, but the quills are of the usual brown colour, edged with lighter brown, with the exception of the second quill in each wing, and two or three of the secondaries of one wing, which are also pure white. The tail-coverts are yellowish white, and the lateral tail-feathers are white, the central ones being of a very pale brownish colour; indeed only three feathers retain their usual colour. The under mandible is also pale yellow; but the eyes were of their ordinary dark brown or black, contrasting strangely with its light-coloured plumage. The bird is an adult female, being fully 7 inches in length, and was in plump and well-fed condition. It was shot on the 7th of February last, to the north of the village of Maxton, Roxburghshire.

The Common Bunting, as it is called, is by no means a very common bird in this locality, and indeed it would seem to be now much rarer than formerly, as, unfortunately for its peace and safety, the quill-feathers are highly esteemed by the anglers in the district for making a very killing variety of artificial fly for trout-fishing.

I have brought with me a specimen of the bird in its ordinary plumage, that those of you who are not very familiar with its usual appearance may see the great contrast exhibited by this pale yellow specimen, where the dark colours are almost entirely obliterated, and the naturally yellowish tinge of the lighter brown parts has become extended over the whole bird and transformed into a pale yellow or yellowish white.

3. I exhibit also a specimen of the LESSER REDPOLE (*Fringilla linaria*, Linn.), shot near Stirling, which has the upper and back parts of the head and sides of the neck pure white, and there are also a few white feathers thinly scattered over other parts of its body. It shows very well the more usual extent in which this accidental white-coloured variety of plumage is generally found.

4. I shall next notice this specimen of the SISKIN (*Carduelis spinus*, Cuv.), which was taken on Arthur's Seat, about the middle of last September; and my reason for doing so is that some of our naturalists seem to me to consider it much rarer in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh than it really is. Our bird-catchers I am informed are in the habit of taking considerable numbers in this neighbourhood by means of their call-birds and nets, all through the winter months; in

some seasons however they catch them in much greater numbers than in others; and although it is one of our winter visitors, still some of them undoubtedly remain to breed, of which indeed several instances have been recorded; and I have myself seen a specimen of the bird which was shot in this neighbourhood in the end of the month of April.

5. I am indebted to my young friend Mr. W. Dumbreck for being able to exhibit to the Society a Scottish specimen of a very rare bird, the **BLACK-WINGED STILT**, or **LONG-LEGGED PLOVER** (*Himantopus melanopterus*, Tem.). It is one of the accidental visitors to Britain which are met with now and then at very uncertain intervals, and of which only some two or three instances are recorded of its occurrence in Scotland. This I hope will be a sufficient apology for exhibiting it; although it was killed a good many years ago, and no notice has ever been given of its capture. It was shot in the breeding season on the south bank of the river Clyde, nearly opposite to Dumbarton Castle, and when seen was squatting on the ground, so that it was at first supposed to be merely a young *Lapwing*, or some such bird. It is easily distinguished by its extremely long stilt-like legs, with three toes in front and none behind; and it appears to be a young bird; the back part of the head and neck being dusky, the scapulars brownish black, the rest of the wing greenish black; and the length of the primaries from the carpal joint to their extremity being only  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches, instead of 8 inches as in the adult, in which they extend considerably beyond the tail; whereas in this specimen they do not reach to within  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch or so of its extremity. The tail is ash-coloured, and the rest of the body is white. It measures about 13 inches in length, and from the termination of the feathered part of the tibia to the foot it is  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches long.

6 & 7. I am also informed that the person who shot this bird was fortunate enough when a young man to capture other two of our rarer birds, which may be worth a passing notice; the one is the **WRYNECK** (*Yunx torquilla*, Linn.), of which an individual was killed in the neighbourhood of Glasgow; and the other (which I have seen) is the **ROSE-COLOURED PASTOR** (*Pastor roseus*), which was shot in a garden near Caldwell, Renfrewshire.

I allude to these birds, as I am anxious to impress upon the Members of the Society the propriety of recording all the instances of the occurrence of any of our rarer birds which may happen to come to their knowledge; as it is only in this way that anything like a correct idea of the ornithology of a particular district, or of our country itself, is to be obtained.

8. Through the politeness of Mr. Dickson, of the well-known firm of John Dickson and Co., Gunmakers, Princes Street, I am enabled to show this beautiful specimen of the very rare **GREAT-BILLED** or **SURF SCOTER** (*Oidemia perspicillata*, Flem.). It is a fine adult male, and was shot in Musselburgh Bay on Friday last the 2nd of April. The Scoters are true sea ducks, seeking among the waves and surf for their varied molluscous diet. Three species are described as being found occasionally on our coasts during the winter months;

the Black, the Velvet, and this, the Surf Scoter ; but the last of these is only a very rare visitor. They are dark or black plumaged ducks, the females being brown ; and this species is easily distinguished from the others by the rounded patch of white on its forehead, between and in front of its eyes ; and the somewhat shield-shaped patch, square above, and pointed posteriorly, on the nape and running down the neck. The rest of the plumage is deep bluish black tinged with brownish on the quills and the wedge-shaped tail. The appearance of the bill is singular : prominent in the middle over the nostrils, which are pervious (and to which point the feathers come down), then sloping with a concave outline to the slightly rounded nail at its point ; and it is also very prominent at the lateral parts of its base. Its colour is of a reddish orange, paler at the sides, and becoming yellowish towards the nail ; and there is a very strongly defined square-shaped black patch on each of the two lateral protuberances, edged with the reddish orange of the bill, except at its superior and anterior angle, and in front, where it is succeeded by a triangularly-shaped spot of bright bluish white, terminating at the nostril. The under mandible is of a much paler reddish colour. The bill measured on the side is nearly  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches in length by  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch in height, and about the same in breadth across the lateral protuberances at its base. The eyes are placed high on the head, not far indeed from the top, about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inch above and slightly behind the angle of the mouth. The iris was of a beautiful white, reminding one almost of white china ware. The tarsi are of a reddish orange colour in front and dusky behind, and the toes are also reddish orange with dusky spots at the joints, the intervening membranes being of a dusky black ; the claws are small and black. The whole bird is about 21 inches in length ; and from the carpal joint to the extremity of the first and second primaries which are the longest, it is  $9\frac{3}{4}$  inches, the wing reaching only to a very little beyond the base of the tail. Fleming in his 'British Animals' mentions that the Surf Scoter is said by Temminck to have occurred in Orkney. And I shall quote a short passage from Sir W. Jardine's interesting 'Ornithology of Great Britain,' part iv. p. 162 (Naturalist's Library), which seems to give the best summary of its occurrence : he says,—“The Surf Scoter is an extremely rare bird in Britain, and even in Europe ; the coasts of North America (where it is plentiful) being its real habitation. It has been stated by most of our modern British ornithologists, that specimens of this bird occur now and then in the vicinity of the Orkney and Shetland Islands, but we are not aware of any being lately procured there. In the 'Birds of Europe,' a specimen is stated to have been killed in the Firth of Forth, and Mr. Yarrell records another instance of a recent specimen coming into the possession of Mr. Bartlett of London : all these in this country have occurred in winter. It is of nearly equal rarity on the continent, and few notices of it occur either in any of the recent works devoted to natural history, or in those books of tours which lately, under the apology of sport, have recorded some interesting anecdotes on the habits of little-known species.” So that this beautiful adult male is to be considered apparently as the second instance of the bird's occur-

ring in the Firth of Forth, and only the third or fourth time that it has been observed in Britain.

9. And in conclusion I may call your attention to a fine specimen of the PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*, Bail.), or *Anser phœnicopus*, Bart., which seems to be not very uncommon in this district at this time of the year. It was only pointed out as a new species in this country so recently as 1839, and is easily known by its short bill and pink feet, which the names given to it point out, and which distinguish it from the Bean Goose (*Anser segetum*), which it much resembles. The whole bird measured some 28 inches in length, the narrow bill being (along the side) little more than  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch long, and much shorter than the head; its colour is black, except a band across its middle which is bright reddish pink. Legs and feet reddish pink, in some parts brighter than in others, with the claws dusky. I have observed a few specimens of this bird in the poulterers' shops lately, said to have been shot towards the west country. This specimen was killed in the Carnwath district, adjoining this county to the south-west. I have had sent me the following note, giving notice of these geese occurring in the neighbourhood of Midcalder (Edinburghshire), by the friend who shot this one on the 4th of this month: this you may perhaps consider of some little interest, as not much appears to be known of the habits of this particular kind of goose; and with it I conclude: he says,—“At this season yearly, the geese come in considerable numbers for the purpose of feeding on the sown fields, particularly in the moorland districts, where the country is open and they see about them; they are very shy and easily disturbed; where they are in numbers today, there are none tomorrow; they rarely settle near the same place after being disturbed; the evening about dusk is the time to creep upon them, when they are arranging their sleeping berth commonly at the side of some out-of-the-way bit of water—lakes, ponds, not running streams. About a hundred of them passed over this house on Sunday evening a little before 8 o'clock; they speak much to each other, and very loud, giving ample notice of their approach to bed; those on Sunday evening were within shot, and must have gone to sleep at some short distance at the Curling Ponds. The bird you got was shot about nine miles from this, in the Carnwath district; and was one of a considerable flock, in the act of taking up their sleeping quarters. They are sometimes got by laying in wait for them about the sown fields. I sent the bird for a *roast*—the culinary qualities are much prized—mode of proceeding, see ‘Meg Dodds.’ I was on the look-out for them till 9 o'clock last night, but no success. The getting them is quite a matter of chance.—April 6th, 1852.”

CORFIOTE SHELLS. BY SYLVANUS HANLEY, ESQ.

Although the accompanying list of species contains nothing remarkable, yet being, I believe, the only published catalogue of the shells indigenous to that most beautiful island, it may possibly prove not devoid of utility to those who study the geographical distribution